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Tim W Hayes 02/22/2007 03:01:57 PM From DB/Inbox: Tim W Hayes

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Text:

C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 00277

SIPDIS
CX:

ACTION: POL
INFO: CONS TSR PMA ECON FCS PA MGT DAO DCM AMB RAO

DISSEMINATION: POL /1
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: POL:JWEINER
DRAFTED: POL:KDEGNAN
CLEARED: POL:JWEINER

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0896
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKDAI/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5// PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU//TCH// PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU PRIORITY
RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000277

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: NATIONALISM TURNING NASTY IN TURKEY

REF: A. ANKARA 0144
[1](#)B. ANKARA 0137

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR JANICE WEINER FOR REASONS 1.5(B), (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The nationalism that has been a unifying force since the Turkish Republic's founding in 1923 is becoming dangerously divisive under the pressure of national elections, government-military tensions and the continuing focus on the PKK in Iraq. The Dink assassination offered a brief window of sanity (see ref A), but subsequent nationalist backlash indicates the depth of the divide in Turkish society. The government has moved only cautiously, reluctant to exert leadership or make waves in an election year. The prevailing mood is indicative of a cross-party election ploy gone awry -- everyone, including the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), is competing for nationalist votes, a move PM Erdogan likely sees as a hedge against the military as well as a sop to AKP's nationalist faction. In this explosive atmosphere, few, save a handful of outspoken media columnists, have shown the courage to urge that Turkey pull firmly back from the edge of volatile ultranationalist extremism.

[1](#)2. (C) For months, it has been clear that the so-called mainstream parties, both the governing AKP and the main opposition, ostensibly center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), have been wooing the nationalist vote. For AKP, the

strategy has been pragmatic: it is a big tent party with a nationalist wing that it needs to placate. It also seeks to use nationalism to protect its flank against the military and attract a large share of the 4 million young people who will be voting for the first time. It shares with CHP the goal of drawing votes away from the traditional nationalists, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), to prevent that party from entering parliament.

UNCHECKED NATIONALISM

13. (C) Having gone unchecked, it now appears that nationalism is exceeding the bounds of political expediency. In the wake of the Hrant Dink murder, most Turks were stunned by video clips released February 2 that show police proudly taking photos with Dink's murderer before a Turkish flag. The photos fueled rumors of police involvement in the shooting and escalated anxiety that further extremist incidents could happen at any time. This was in addition to post-funeral nationalist reactions -- e.g., soccer stadium violence and overt antipathy to the "We are all Armenians" and "We are all Hrant Dink" funeral slogans.

14. (C) Erdogan's deputy chief of cabinet told us he expects more serious events to occur, but claimed the government can only "react" under Turkey's democratic system. Instead of direct action, the PM is responding to the ultranationalist threat indirectly, by sacking negligent officials (i.e. Trabzon's governor and police chief) and trying to address unemployment in Trabzon, one breeding ground for ultranationalists such as Dink's alleged assailant (ref B). The government also belatedly offered protection to a number of other well-known figures who have received threats for defending minority and human rights, including Professor Baskin Oran and author Elif Shafak. The voices of reason and calls for national introspection have come largely from newspaper columnists. Government statements have been conspicuously absent, save for a tit-for-tat between the PM and MHP leader Bahceli, in which the PM distinguished between (his) nationalist patriotism and the divisive, racist nationalism that he implied forms the core of MHP ideology.

ARTICLE 301 TARGETS POTENTIAL VICTIMS

15. (C) Initial calls to abolish controversial Penal Code Article 301, under which Dink, Orhan Pamuk and others were charged with "insulting Turkishness", have met with weak responses from government officials and strong rebukes from opposition leaders. Some commentators argue that prosecutions under the provision target the accused as an enemy of Turkey, opening them up to vigilante threats and further stoking nationalism fires. Nevertheless, to date, Erdogan has ruled out abolishing the article and threw the difficult job of finding an acceptable amendment to a reconstituted NGO commission that failed to agree on language when first tasked by the PM last fall. The NGO commission met and announced its proposed changes on February 8, offering a watered down version of the article that is unlikely to resolve the controversy.

16. (C) Justice Minister Cicek's recent comments that the NGO meeting is "untimely" and the Article 301 discussion meaningless reveal the fracture within AKP on the issue. Cicek, Deputy PM Sener and others contend the problem is in the provision's application; as more case law develops, the parameters of the article will become clear and inconsistencies will be eliminated. Even if Article 301 were abolished, the argument goes, a number of other penal code provisions could be used to the same effect. The opposition, including the liberal left, is forcefully resisting any change in Article 301, which has become both an international liability and a domestic nationalist rallying point. The voices in the wilderness have come from intellectuals, who have taken a stand in favor of abolishing 301 because, in their view, it fuels nationalism and puts at risk outspoken thinkers, such as Hrant Dink, whose ideas are essential to advancing Turkey's democratic debate and continuing to break down taboos.

¶7. (C) In the current election-charged climate, the key actors seem unwilling to put aside their self-interests to collectively combat a dangerous trend. President Sezer has been silent and Erdogan's statements seem more calibrated to placating nationalist voters than to unifying a troubled country. Opposition leaders have added to the divisive atmosphere by focusing on differences within Turkey that fuel public fears. Some contacts who lived through previous eras of extreme nationalism are worried by the increasingly nasty, us-against-them tone of the debate; increasing numbers of ordinary Turks see a country besieged -- by the PKK, instability in Iraq, an uncertain Iran, EU-accession reforms and other perceived threats.

¶8. (C) The key missing ingredient is leadership. Erdogan and AKP, rather than taking bold steps and helping to shape the public debate, seem intimidated by the prospects of elections. Rather than leading, they are allowing public opinion to lead them. The Dink murder should have made it clear that playing the nationalist card may have seemed expedient, but instead unleashes danger. By not exercising leadership, AKP risks a more volatile electorate and helps to revive a nationalist hydra that could prove exceedingly difficult to put back in the box once the elections are behind them. End Comment.

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